

## From party to pandemic – Frames and metaphors in the news coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak in Austria

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### Abstract

Media framing facilitates people's understanding of a threat and affects one's emotional reaction. It therefore plays a vital role in both individual and societal responses to a public health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a combination of conceptual metaphor analysis and qualitative frame analysis, this article examines how three Austrian newspapers framed the initial national outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020. The results show that at that early stage, media coverage was primarily concerned with the national government's political actions to contain the disease. Only a few articles framed the situation in terms of personal experiences and possible economic or social consequences. As has been the case in research reporting on other health crises, metaphors of war, journeys, and natural disasters were used to conceptualize the coronavirus pandemic. Yet, overall, the tone remained neutral, as the media framing was clearly aimed at passing on information and conveying a sense of urgency while at the same time trying to avoid scare tactics.

### Keywords

COVID-19, Austria, conceptual metaphors, framing, news coverage, journalism, health crisis

## 1 Introduction

Previously associated with alpine sports and après ski parties, the Ischgl resort turned into a very different sort of news item in the spring of 2020. Ischgl has become “synonymous with the spreading of Covid-19” (Rös/DPA, 2021), and “a second Ischgl” is frequently used as a metaphor for worst-case scenarios of an uncontrolled outbreak (e. g., by the former German secretary of health, Mes/AFP, 2020). Indeed, more than 10 000 coronavirus infections were traced back to the Ischgl region (Lorenz & Somnavilla, 2020). The Ischgl outbreak became a key “event” for the subsequent COVID-19 news coverage in Austria.

On March 5, the Icelandic government declared Ischgl a high-risk area after 15 returning tourists tested positive for COVID-19 (Hafstað, 2020). Other countries were hesitant to follow, as was Austria itself. When on March 7 a waiter at an après ski bar tested positive for the virus, the state of Tyrol initially did not respond, because further contagion was considered unlikely by the Tyrolean Medical Directorate from a “medical point of view” (Al-Serori, 2020). On March 9,

it became clear that the waiter had infected at least 15 other people with the virus. Between March 11 and March 13, the government declared various restrictions on travel, education, and public life, which came into effect on March 16 with the first lockdown.

In the aftermath, Austria's public health agency accused the ski resort of being the source of “[...] the country's biggest cluster of coronavirus cases, infecting more than eight hundred Austrians and up to twice as many people abroad, particularly in Germany and in Scandinavian countries” (Bell, 2020). In October 2020, an investigative commission appointed by the state of Tyrol attested to “serious misjudgments” by local authorities. The report also accused the state of Tyrol of having disseminated untrue information and then Chancellor Sebastian Kurz of having made errors in communication (“Expertenkommission präsentierte Ischgl-Bericht: Die Kurzfassung im Wortlaut,” 2020b).

As the ski resort town of Ischgl is often cited as a prime example of how the virus spread rapidly, it is crucial to analyze the metaphors and frames used in the media coverage at this early stage. Media framing affects society's



emotional reaction to a threat and has an impact on people's will to engage in disease prevention behavior (Heffner, Vives, & Feldman-Hall, 2021). Therefore, at the early stage of a pandemic, news media form a key communication channel that can facilitate uncertainty reduction, self-efficacy, and reassurance for both the public and affected groups by focusing on health risks, political-legal issues, and prevention or health education frames. Alternatively, they can increase uncertainty by framing the pandemic as a crisis and focusing on societal problems and economic consequences (Pan & Meng, 2016; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). It is particularly relevant to examine how the Austrian media outlets framed the Ischgl super-spreader event, shaping early public perceptions through the use of frames in their reporting.

## 2 Frames and metaphors in times of crisis

Frame analysis has long been a viable way of understanding how people make sense of life events. Originating in Erving Goffman's (1974, p. 21) micro-sociological approach, frames are understood as "schemata of interpretation that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large." Frames, in other words, are models for the organization of knowledge. With their help, the social world can be meaningfully structured. The framing of events in news media in particular plays an important role in constructing and contesting collectively accepted meaning, because media serve as both the central arena and a widely recognized agent of public discourse (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 626).

### 2.1 Journalistic framing of pandemics

How journalists frame the coverage of health crises has been examined on the basis of a number of pandemics, for example, the Ebola pandemic in the years 2014–2016 (Li, Brewer, & Ley, 2017; Zhang, Bie, & Billings, 2017), various influenza waves such as the so-called swine flu (Angeli, 2012; Lee & Basnyat, 2013; Pan & Meng, 2016; Vasterman & Ruigrok,

2013), and the SARS pandemics in the years 2002 and 2003 (Li et al., 2017).

As for the COVID-19 pandemic, recent studies of Spanish, Italian, and U.S. media show that the early coverage focused mainly on economic and social consequences and political responses rather than health issues (Basch, Kecojevic, & Wagner, 2020; Hart, Chinn, & Soroka, 2020; Tejedor, Cervi, Tusa, Portales, & Zabolina, 2020). Hubner (2021, p. 118) concludes that "the focus on societal effects, rather than information regarding the health risks and expert community response, might be because the expert community was still largely uncertain about the cause, transmission, and subsequent health effects of COVID-19." Citizens, people from advocacy groups, and politicians were quoted more frequently than academics and health experts. This coverage marked a difference from previous pandemics, during which the news media had more often relied on health and government officials as dominant sources (Hubner, 2021).

Other studies, however, indicate that the COVID-19 frames differed based on specific national contexts. For instance, in Canada, "health crisis" was the dominant frame (Poirier, Ouellet, Rancourt, Béchard, & Dufresne, 2020). In Serbia, whereas, the media focused on politicians and health officials, sidelining citizens and COVID-19 patients, and adopted the perspective of the government (Milutinović, 2021). Conducting a comparative analysis of selected international news media coverage between December 2019 and April 2020, Ogbodo et al. (2020) found that human interest and fear/scare frames were more frequent than those of conflict, economic consequences, attribution of responsibility, morality or religion, politicization, ethnicization, and hope, but they also found significant differences among the various media channels.

Finally, various studies on pandemics have examined the "tone-of-voice" of the news coverage, which can be positive, negative, or overall neutral about a certain topic and can have an emotional effect on the readers through the choice of linguistic framing devices (e.g., Li et al., 2017; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013; Zhang et al., 2017). In the H1N1 coverage in Singapore, for example,

the media strove for a neutral or positive tone of voice. Correspondingly, the majority of articles did not transport emotions, followed by emotional appeal framing that conveyed reassurance or satisfaction rather than fear, anger, or sadness (Lee & Basnyat, 2013).

## 2.2 Conceptual metaphors in the news coverage of pandemics

Because framing essentially dictates how meaning is assigned, the use of metaphors and comparisons has always played an important role both in methodological considerations and in empirical framing studies. In fact, there is a noticeable overlap between the framing concept and theories of metaphor (e.g., Chilton, 2004; Hertog & McLeod, 2001). In conceptual metaphor theory, in particular, framing is the *raison d'être* of metaphors, because the latter are treated as outward expressions of underlying cognitive concepts, which are also metaphorically structured (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Cognitive metaphors are indicators for the construction of realities. They suggest solutions and thereby have an impact on political decision-making processes (Chilton, 2004; Entman, 1993). Metaphorical framing also has a strong influence on how people respond to persuasive messages (Cornelissen, Holt, & Zundel, 2011). Research has therefore repeatedly addressed the question of how media frame important political decisions metaphorically (e.g., Shaw & Nerlich, 2015; Spencer, 2012).

Researchers have long paid attention to how diseases and health issues are metaphorically framed in public discourse, from the “war on drugs” and the AIDS “plague” to the “swine flu” (Angeli, 2012). Frequently, efforts to contain a disease are conceptualized with metaphors of war (e.g., Chiang & Duann, 2007; Koteyko, Brown, & Crawford, 2008), but there are notable absences as well. One possible explanation may be that war metaphors only appear when “the relationship to the disease is either ‘personal’ or perceived as a threat to a ‘nation’” (Wallis & Nerlich, 2005, p. 2633). War metaphors in relation to diseases can force attention, transport a sense of urgency, and call for action (Burnette, Hoyt, Buttrick, & Auster-Gussman, 2022), but they have also been criticized for

being paternalistic, contributing to the passivization of patients, and adding to anxiety and stigmatization (Castro Seixas, 2021; Reisfield & Wilson, 2004).

The war metaphor was also a strong feature in COVID-19 media coverage (e.g., Kahambing, 2021; Kozlova, 2021; Silva, 2020), including critical debates about the applicability and effects of war metaphors in both scientific and media discourses (e.g., Craig, 2020; WeCope, 2020; Semino, 2021). Experimental studies suggest that war metaphors may in fact be counterproductive for public health (Burnette et al., 2022; Hauser & Schwarz, 2015), but “socio-political individual variables such as speakers’ political orientation and source of information favor the acceptance of metaphor congruent entailments” (Panzeri, Di Paola, & Domaneschi, 2021, p. 2).

Other frequent conceptual metaphors for epidemic or pandemic diseases include the framing of a virus as a natural disaster or a living being, and comparisons with notorious pandemics such as the Spanish influenza, the plague, or cholera are deeply embedded in collective memory (e.g., Angeli, 2012; Wallis & Nerlich, 2012). The same pattern has been found in preliminary research on COVID-19 metaphors, with variations such as coronavirus as a “wave (tsunami),” a “fire,” a “killer,” a “thief,” or a “criminal” (Duarte Silva, 2020; Kahambing, 2021; Salamurović, 2020; Semino, 2021). Metaphors of movement and spatial orientation also appear internationally, for example, in the form of journeys, change, or (economic) redirection (Andrioi & Moraru, 2020; Duarte Silva, 2020).

## 2.3 Research questions

The preceding sections demonstrate the significance of frames and metaphors in shaping perceptions of crises. Specifically, the coverage of the early stage of the coronavirus pandemic is of great relevance. Media attention to COVID-19 was already high at this point in Austria (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Nielsen, 2020), and neighboring Italy had been hit hard by the disease. However, at the beginning of March, Austrian media were confronted by a new situation, as COVID-19 turned from an international into a national

health crisis. Therefore, this study aims to determine the Austrian media's use of framing devices and types of framing at the beginning of the pandemic crisis in the country through addressing the following questions.

- › RQ1: How were technical and rhetorical framing devices used in the early COVID-19 news coverage?
- › RQ2: What kinds of reasoning about the coronavirus, politics, and society do the conceptual metaphors convey?
- › RQ3: Which frames were established through the technical, rhetorical, and reasoning devices?

The first question pertains to the means by which frames related to COVID-19, political countermeasures, and societal concerns were established in the media. It covers both structural and rhetorical choices, as well as the selection of sources. The second question is more specifically concerned with metaphorical framing. Theoretically, it refers to cognitive metaphor analysis (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), with metaphors treated as reasoning devices (Reese, 2010) rather than rhetorical devices. The third research question is aimed at identifying the news framing by using a frame typology deductively derived from the literature review.

### 3 Research method

To answer the above questions, a research design combining the qualitative framing analysis proposed by Linström and Marais (2012) and the presumptions that may be inferred from the cognitive metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (2003) was adopted. We paid particular attention to the use of metaphors because the metaphor as a framing device most obviously transports discursively established meanings of a given culture (Hertog & McLeod, 2001; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

#### 3.1 Structure, object of investigation, and study period

Linström and Marais (2012) have developed a structured grid for qualitative analysis, which provided the basis for our research design:

First, select a medium or topic (Step 1). Next, establish a specific time frame for your analysis (Step 2). Following this, draw a sample for examination (Step 3). Subsequently, determine the unit of analysis to focus on (Step 4). Proceed by choosing a suitable frame typology (Step 5). Afterward, provide clear operational definitions (Step 6). Finally, identify and analyze the news frames (Step 7).

In this study, we considered a sample of 46 articles published in the print editions of three daily Austrian newspapers – *Der Standard* (14 articles), *Die Presse* (eight articles), and *Tiroler Tageszeitung* (24 articles) – between the detection of the COVID-19 outbreak in Ischgl on March 5 and the decision to impose a nationwide lockdown on March 16. This period was chosen because it covers the earliest stage, thus facilitating our investigation of the initial framing of the COVID-19 outbreak in an Austrian tourism hotspot and its potential danger for other European countries.

As the media analysis and the Austrian Digital News Report (Gadringer, Holzinger, Sparviero, Trappel, & Kuzmanov, 2022) show, daily newspapers in Austria continue to be in high demand. Compared to other countries in Europe, Austria relies almost twice as often on printed newspapers. Newspapers were selected for this study because of their pivotal role in disseminating information. While it is actually the yellow press, *Die Kronen Zeitung*, which draws the largest print readership in Austria, *Der Standard* and *Die Presse* are nationwide quality papers and – together with the public broadcasting service *ORF* – receive the highest international attention.

*Der Standard* is a liberal and independent newspaper with a focus on quality journalism. With a reach of 7.3% during the pandemic, it is one of the largest daily newspapers in Austria (Media Analyse, 2022). The newspaper *Die Presse* has a liberal-conservative editorial line. Although the medium lost some of its reach during the pandemic (reach of 4% in the years 2021–2022), after *Der Standard*, it is Austria's largest nationwide quality newspaper (Media Analyse, 2022). *Tiroler Tageszeitung*, further, is the dominant local medium for the federal state of Tyrol and has a reach of 3.2%. It covered the crisis first-

hand and extensively and was therefore an important source of information.

The *APA DeFacto Database* was used to retrieve the relevant articles using the keywords “Corona” and “Covid-19” in combination with “Ischgl,” “Tirol,” or “Österreich.” Thus, all articles that centrally addressed the spread of the virus in Ischgl were examined. Units of analysis may consist of single words, symbols, phrases, propositions, whole stories, or visual features (Matthes, 2009). In qualitative frame analysis, individual news stories are often selected as units of analysis (Linström & Marais, 2012). Because qualitative analysis aims to “capture the meanings embedded in the internal relations within texts” (Linström & Marais, 2012, p. 29), we chose thematically coherent elements (sentences or paragraphs) as the coding units in this study and whole news articles as units of analysis.

### 3.2 Framing devices and methodical approach

A frame typology can be created either inductively from the data material or deductively from previous research. For selecting news frames and their operational definitions, we made use of the large body of existing framing studies on pandemic news coverage, which provided us with a basic category structure for different types of framing. While such a deductive step carries the danger of taking the well-trodden path and defining “frames in a stereotypical or conventional way” (Tankard, 2001, p. 98), its benefit lay in the opportunity to place our sample articles on COVID-19 in the context of previous media framing of pandemics.

Based on our review of the research on past pandemics, we developed six types of frames and their respective operational definitions (Linström & Marais, 2012). Within these basic framing categories, the actual frames were created and modified inductively through constant comparisons of framing devices:

- › *Context framing* places the COVID-19 pandemic in a thematic context (Hubner, 2021; Lee & Basnyat, 2013; Li et al., 2017; Ogbodo et al., 2020; Pan & Meng, 2016),

such as a *medical/scientific, political/legal, economic, social, or personal* context.

- › *Scope framing* treats COVID-19 as a matter of a certain geographical relevance. Thus, in relation to the position of readers, it involves framing the pandemic as a *local or regional* phenomenon (in this case limited to Ischgl, the whole Patznauntal, or Tyrol), a *national* Austrian or *international* phenomenon, or *without a particular scope* (Pieri, 2019).
- › *Responsibility framing* is concerned with who is responsible *for a situation* (e.g., an increase in COVID-19 cases) or *for taking action* (e.g., measures against further spreading; Ogbodo et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2017).
- › An article can make a positive or negative evaluation of an event it is reporting on or present its subject in a neutral way (Lee & Basnyat, 2013). *Evaluation framing* refers to the evaluation of political and medicinal measures for the prevention of further spreading of the coronavirus, treatment of patients, testing, vaccine development, financial help programs, and so on. Evaluations can be *negative, positive, or neutral*.
- › *Tone-of-voice framing* refers to the emotional load of COVID-19 news coverage or the emotional appeal a news article makes to its readers. It may include fear, anger, or sadness, but also reassurance, hope, or satisfaction, among others (Lee & Basnyat, 2013; Li et al., 2017; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013). However, because there is not always a clear distinction across various emotional appeals – for example, between expressions of anger and frustration – we used a less detailed coding system, differentiating only between *positive* and *negative emotional appeals* and a *neutral tone of voice*.

As Linström and Marais (2012, p. 30) note, “the identification of news frames requires the researchers to know *how* to look for frames, as well as *what* to look for.” Following their suggestion, we used Wimmer and Dominick’s (2014) constant comparative technique for the process of coding the news frames within our frame typology (the “*how*” of frame analysis). This technique for qualitative research analysis consists of four steps:

“1. comparatively assigning incidents to categories [in this case, frames]; 2. elaborating and refining categories; 3. searching for relationships and themes among categories; 4. simplifying and integrating data into a coherent theoretical structure” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014, p. 123).

The “what” of identifying news frames refers to determining the devices that make a frame “more salient in a communicating text” (Entman, 1993, p. 53). These framing devices can be divided into two categories: rhetorical and technical (Table 1; Linström & Marais, 2012). Based on this division, an article could be characterized as, for example, using an economic or political context frame and making a positive or negative emotional appeal.

*Technical devices* are genre-specific visual and textual elements such as headlines, subheadings, leads, source selection, and quote selection (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Sources and quotes can be used in different ways. Selection of sources implies strategic choices regarding how sources are identified and where they are placed in the story. Quotes can be sourced from experts to claim validity or facticity; from official sources to link certain points of view to authority; from eyewitnesses and affected persons to claim validity or attach first-person anecdotes to the story; from the “general public” to voice an opinion; or from what is considered “deviant” to marginalize certain opinions.

*Rhetorical devices*, which are particularly capable of enforcing a frame within the text, include word choices, exemplars, and depictions of principal subjects through the use of modifiers (Entman, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Structural elements of a text, such as sentences “that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgement” (Entman, 1993, p. 52) and concluding statements or paragraphs (Tankard, 2001), can also be of interest.

Deviating from Linström and Marais (2012), we see metaphors as grounded in cognitive concepts and therefore as *reasoning devices* (Reese, 2010, p. 20; Table 1) rather than rhetorical devices, because they define an object by highlighting some of its aspects while hiding others, imply evaluations, and

suggest possible courses of action (Chilton & Lakoff, 1995). In this context, we also mention the “framing power” of metaphors, as metaphorical concepts have the ability to influence how certain topics are perceived. Brugman, Burgers, and Vis (2019) use the example of the conceptual metaphor “economic problems are weather” (e.g., “economic storm,” “monetary rain,” and “credit drought”). Following Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of cognitive metaphor, individuals confronted with these metaphors assume that the solution to an economic problem lies beyond our capabilities. From this logical view, metaphorical concepts are significant framing devices that influence individuals’ reasoning.

Comparisons are based on the same functional principles as are metaphors, and they are thus often presented as special cases of a cognitive concept only insofar as the metaphorical transfer between source and target is made explicit (Knowles & Moon, 2007). However, we consider metaphors and comparisons separately, because the mechanisms of equations are not identical in all cases (Croft & Cruse, 2007).

We began our systematic analysis of conceptual metaphors by identifying the relevant target domains (Schmitt, 2005). These include the following:

- › The *coronavirus*, its transmission, spreading, etc.;
- › *Political measures* to contain the outbreak; and
- › *Society*, in particular, the notion of which society people live in; how society responds to the virus, and how it should respond; and the effects on those areas of society most likely to be affected by the situation and thus were addressed in the news coverage, namely healthcare, economy, and cultural and social life.

Metaphorical expressions relating to these target domains were then extracted from the texts and identified as belonging to the same underlying conceptual metaphor through a process of constant comparison and regrouping. This categorization of metaphors was extended by our review of prior literatures on the use of metaphors in communi-

cation about diseases and pandemics, as well as common metaphors for politics, economics, society, and so on (for an overview e.g., Beer & De Landtsheer, 2004). Based on our analysis of the different types of framing devices (RQ1 and RQ2), we assigned the news frames to their corresponding frame typologies (RQ3).

Table 1 Framing devices (modified from Linström & Marais, 2012)

Framing devices	
Rhetorical and textual devices	Word choices; exemplars; depictions / modifiers Sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgement; concluding statements or paragraphs
Reasoning devices	Conceptual metaphors; comparisons
Technical devices	Headlines; subheadings; leads Sources and quotes (expert, official, eyewitness or affected persons, general public, deviant)

## 4 Findings

This section presents the technical, rhetorical, and reasoning devices found in the news reports and the conclusions that can be drawn from them to answer the research questions.

### 4.1 Technical devices: How attention is aroused

The *technical devices* analyzed in this research included headlines, sources, and quotes. In our sample, subheadings – which help structure the article and emphasize its key points – were used too infrequently for us to form any conclusions about similarities. The headlines – which are meant to catch the reader’s attention – were mainly descriptive and therefore neutral. Out of 46 headlines, only seven had a negative and alarming character (e.g., “Severe test at all levels”; Witting, 2020a), and two had a positive tone (e.g., “The crisis as an opportunity”; Schöpf, 2020). Headlines calling for solidarity appeared only after the Austrian government announced its anti-coronavirus measures on March 13. On

March 14, *Der Standard* and *Die Presse* published commentaries titled “We are all part of the solution” (Kotynek, 2020)<sup>1</sup> and “We have a great responsibility” (Nowak, 2020), respectively, which asked the readers to comply with the political decisions, that is, to stay at home and act responsibly when in company with other people.

*Sources* and *quotes* play an important role in establishing context frames, because they bring certain people and positions into focus. Out of a total of 48 named sources in our sample, 36 referred to politicians such as the Austrian secretary of health, Rudolf Anschober, and the Austrian chancellor, Sebastian Kurz. Six were expert sources, and six more included perspectives from affected individuals or eyewitnesses. In the earliest phase of the COVID-19 outbreak in Austria, politicians were by far the most frequently quoted, while first-hand accounts from affected individuals appeared less often: 64 text passages quoted politicians or the government, 11 quoted affected individuals, and only five quotes were sourced from experts.

Aside from those pertaining to occasional scrutiny of the crisis management in Tyrol, most quotes from politicians discussed local and nationwide preventive measures against COVID-19 and were not defensive, but explanatory in nature. In sum, a major portion of the news articles could be termed as “collaborative journalism,” in which the official perspective was adopted and politicians and government officials were given room to explain and/or justify measures against the pandemic.

By contrast, personalization – usually a stock element of journalism – played a subordinate role. Very few articles in the “Ischgl” context – and beyond – narrated the stories of hotel owners, tourists, or families with children. Thus, while political context framing gave a voice to the politicians, social context framing, which refers to the pandemic’s impact on society, mostly captured the journalists’ own voices and rarely considered the public’s perspectives.

1 All quotes included in this paper have been translated by the authors from the original German into English.

## 4.2 Rhetorical devices: How the situation is depicted

*Thematically reinforcing sentences* occur throughout a news text, repeating the core argument. Their content usually mirrors the headline and lead. Taken together, headlines, leads, and reinforcing sentences are framing devices that, in the news genre, offer clear indication of context framing. In addition, they may also project a tone of voice and offer an evaluation. In our sample, for instance, authors frequently addressed a collective “we” that must tackle the crisis together and act responsibly. Arguments against or in favor of the Tyrolean government’s response to the outbreak were also proposed in thematically reinforcing sentences. The local daily newspaper *Tiroler Tageszeitung*, for the most part, favored the government, while *Der Standard* and *Die Presse* tended to criticize the government’s late response.

News items are often structured like an inverted pyramid and, therefore, contain the least important information in the final paragraph. If a text is not informative but argumentative in nature – as commentaries usually are – the *concluding statements or paragraphs* are used to summarize the argument or to repeat the key elements. Out of a total of 25 commentaries, ten made political statements: Seven evaluated the political actions of the national government and were overall positive or reserved judgment until later; one evaluated the crisis management of Tyrol in a strongly negative way; and two placed Austrian politics in the context of the European Union, calling for a consistent approach to control the outbreak. During this early phase of COVID-19 in Austria, however, 15 commentaries addressed the readers: Six made appeals for solidarity, responsibility, and calm, while two appealed to the elderly and the sick to be careful:

But as long as everyone does what they can as well as they can, that’s enough. The only thing is that “everyone” really means everyone. Because what kind of country we are will not be revealed on October 26 (the National Holiday), but in the coming weeks and months. Is Austria the country of those who hoard toilet paper in a panic and behave egoistically? Or those who show consid-

eration and insight? In any case, we don’t want to have to answer this question with a laconic “Let’s wait and see.” (Weiser, 2020)

Two commentaries asked people to remain calm, but did so by downplaying the dangers of the virus. Four commentaries ended on a positive note, describing the chances for a better society spurred by COVID-19’s effects. Only one voiced a slight concern, describing the “uncanny momentum of the crisis” (Müller-Funk, 2020).

*Exemplars* are typically used as feature elements in a news story to illustrate an event, prove a point, or draw the reader into the story. Just as sources and quotes were seldom taken from the general public or people directly affected by the situation, exemplars were also very rare in our sample. Again, while the emphasis was majorly placed on politicians and political action, journalists consulted “ordinary” people on very few occasions. These latter exemplars mainly described the effects of COVID-19 on patients and the consequences of the lockdown on tourism in Paznaun Valley.

*Depictions* and *modifiers* are rhetorical framing devices that evaluate events, lend atmosphere to a situation, and transport emotions; in other words, they make a tone-of-voice frame salient in a text. Most of the depictions and modifiers in our sample underlined the exceptional character of the situation (“scary,” “dangerous,” “difficult,” “dramatic,” “unsparingly”) and the political measures to contain the virus (“hard,” “massive,” “rigorous,” “extensive”). Because the news channels vied for a neutral tone in their coverage, depictions and modifiers were rare and occurred more often in commentaries, particularly in *Der Standard*, than in the news reports.

Overall, the *choice of words* tended to be neutral, especially in news reports that informed about the government’s actions and the behavioral rules that were in place during the lockdown. These reports also served to both emphasize how serious and unique the situation was and to reassure the readers that the right measures were being taken. A case in point is the commentary, “Don’t panic, the situation is serious” (Stuiber, 2020).



Anti-coronavirus measures were described as “deep cuts” (Sprenger, 2020; Vahrner, 2020a), but as “correct” (Nowak, 2020) and “well-coordinated” (Stuiber, 2020) efforts by a government whose approach was “neither overzealous nor hyperventilating” (Stuiber, 2020). At this early stage, harsh words were also rare in the critique of the Tyrolean government. Only two out of five articles that voiced concerns used strong language, accusing the Tyrolean government of “greed and failure” (Mayer, 2020) and criticizing that “Either the priorities are not right, or they have not yet understood what it is all about” (Weiser, 2020).

### 4.3 Reasoning devices: The pathway into the public’s brain

*Comparisons* in our sample were sporadic, but telling. The Ischgl resort was described as the “Ballermann” of the Alps (Mayer, 2020), a phrase (with a negative connotation) originally coined for the tourist party scene in Palma de Mallorca, which is frequently linked with binge drinking and the worst excesses of tourism.

Other comparisons served to emphasize the severity of the situation. One of the mayors in Paznaun Valley was quoted as saying that COVID-19 posed “a difficult situation that came over St. Anton like an apocalypse” (Tiroler Tageszeitung, 2020). Arguably, the most obvious comparisons linked COVID-19 to pandemics deeply embedded in the public’s collective memory, such as the medieval “Black Death” plague and various cholera epidemics of modern times. These articles used either a calming or a warning tone, stating that the coronavirus was not nearly as deadly as more disastrous pandemics (Redl, 2020) and that people should not hunt for scapegoats like in the past (Müller-Funk, 2020).

In order to describe the political and economic consequences, news articles referred to more recent events, but still chose comparisons that served to emphasize how extraordinary the events were:

Almost everything has been said about the medical and ethical side of the war against corona, which will lead to a state of emergency the likes of which has not been seen in Europe since the

end of the Second World War. (Müller-Funk, 2020)

Several articles in the *Tiroler Tageszeitung* compared the early economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis to the bankruptcy of the Lehman investment bank (Nindler, 2020a; Vahrner, 2020c), while one expressed the hope that the present situation might lead to a better future: “The epidemic has given society an opportunity that it did not seize after the Lehman bankruptcy: To make corrections to the prevailing worldview” (Sprenger, 2020).

Conceptual metaphors of *movement* were among the most frequent in the sample and referred to all selected target domains: COVID-19, politics, and society. Political issues involving leadership and political action are typically conceptualized through movement or journey metaphors (Chilton, 2004). Force, speed, and direction are the key elements of movement, which define how a situation is perceived. Some articles in our sample contended that now that “the corona crisis has arrived in Austria with full force” (Vahrner, 2020b), the political system was tasked with “slowing down” further contagion (Zenhäusern, 2020) and needed to take “massively tightened steps” (Vahrner, 2020a). They felt, however, that the speed of developments presented a major challenge to both politics and society as a whole: “Corona drives us ahead of it.... In any case, we are currently chasing the virus” (Nindler, 2020b).

The need to slow down the virus and the experience of slowing down society in the process were among the most frequent metaphors in the sample. The theme of a “standstill of our social life” (Nowak, 2020) was repeated in a number of articles with metaphors related to the concept of *machinery*: “The social life is being shut down, and in a way that the vast majority of people in this country have never experienced” (Sprenger, 2020) and “We will all shift down a gear and restrict ourselves to the essentials” (Stuiber, 2020). Political measures were described as “counter-steering” (Nindler, 2020a) or “pulling the emergency brake” against the disease (Mayer, 2020) while “Austria runs on emergency mode until further notice” (Vahrner, 2020c).

By contrast, metaphors pertaining to *natural phenomena* were rare except for the ubiquitous mentions of a “corona wave” that needed to be “contained” (e. g., Vahrner, 2020a), as its “seepage into Europe had been underestimated” (Nindler, 2020b).

More frequent were metaphors of *war and fighting*, which related to political action, as well as to the behavior of the virus. For example, some articles positioned the public as caught in the “stranglehold of the crisis” (Nindler, 2020a). However, most linguistic expressions of this concept took the form of stock phrases such as “fight against the coronavirus” (Kotynek, 2020; Vahrner, 2020a; Zenhäusern, 2020) and “the war against corona, which led to a state of emergency” (Müller-Funk, 2020). In using the war concept, some articles also enlisted society as tasked with making the fight a success: “Everyone must join in if the struggle is to succeed with as few casualties as possible” (Vahrner, 2020c). In sum, war metaphors – which were repeatedly criticized in the public discourse – were neither varied nor explored in any detail, as would have been the case had they been used as the leading conceptual metaphor in a text.

Several articles described the severe and extraordinary character of the situation as a *trial* of many aspects of contemporary lifestyle, for example, “a trial in which everyone in the country is extremely challenged” (Vahrner, 2020b). Lessons to be drawn from this situation included solidarity, renunciation of former habits, and a better understanding of what was important in life (e. g., Kotynek, 2020; Sprenger, 2020; Witting, 2020b).

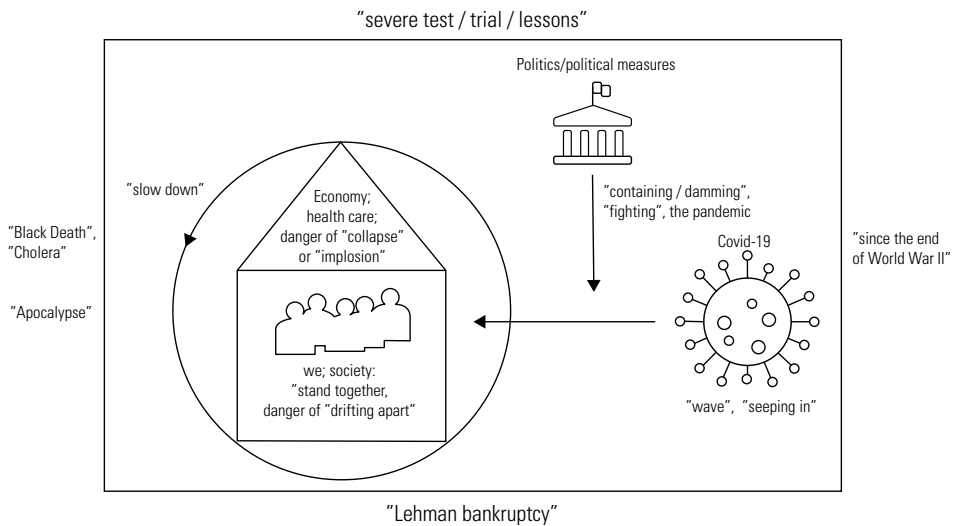
“Such metaphors used as reasoning devices” tended to reinforce the notion of appeal in many articles, which has also been shown in the analysis of technical and rhetorical devices. *Ontological metaphors and metaphors of spatial orientation* (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) make an even stronger call for social cohesion. For example, a commentary titled “The ‘us’” opens with the words, “You don’t have to stand next to each other to stick together. And with a certain distance, we show how closely we as a society face this difficult situation,” and it ends thus: “With the right kind of standing together, the ‘we’

is stronger than the virus” (Witting, 2020b). Likewise, another article warned that “We can only win the fight against the coronavirus if our society does not drift apart into extremes” (Kotynek, 2020). Following much the same logic, some news items viewed the society, the economy (Schöpf, 2020), and the urban world in general (Nowak, 2020) as “fragile” objects. Consequently, they proposed that “the task of the future will be to ensure greater robustness, but at the same time not to deprive developing and emerging countries of their economic foundations” (Schöpf, 2020; Vahrner, 2020c).

The “collapse” of physical objects was another recurring metaphor throughout the COVID-19 coverage. While the main target domain was health care, the source domain could refer to a number of objects, such as buildings and bodies. In the sample, the two were sometimes mixed, as in the following example: “Don’t panic – when it comes to the coronavirus, this is currently the permanent recipe. [...] Experts warn of a collapse of the healthcare system. The latter suffers from having too many building sites even without corona” (Mitterwachauer, 2020). However, the fact that *collapse* metaphors were often combined with metaphors of disease in the same sentence or article usually speaks for the body as a source domain: “The imminent collapse of the financial system [in 2008 / 2009] was prevented with ludicrous injections of billions by governments and central banks” (Vahrner, 2020c).

To conceptualize a pandemic situation with metaphors of *disease and treatment* is probably an obvious choice. Indeed, no other conceptual metaphor in the sample showed such variance at the level of linguistic expression; examples include the “infarction of the health system” (Heubacher, 2020), “the coronavirus is increasingly infecting businesses and workplaces” (Schnauder, 2020), and “in the coming days and weeks, the state of our country, our cities, our world will unfortunately deteriorate even further” (Nowak, 2020). Metaphors of disease and treatment also referred to political action, as in the following quote: “With a reassuring, matter-of-fact manner, [Secretary of Health Anschöber] knows how to explain even deep cuts in everyday life with a soothing tone that con-

Figure 1: System of conceptual metaphors in the early COVID-19 coverage in Austria



Source: Own illustration.

veys security. And Anschober has positively infected his government colleagues, so to speak” (Sprengr, 2020).

In sum, by reducing the system of conceptual metaphors to the most frequent and basic metaphors in the sample, Austrian news items framed society as threatened by COVID-19, which was coming from outside as a “wave” or a “seepage” (Figure 1). Per the media framing, the government was “fighting” the virus and taking measures to “contain” or “dam” the outbreak; however, for the measures to be effective, “we” must “stand together,” while various aspects of social life “slow down” and both the health care system and the economy are in danger of “collapsing.” Few comparisons were made in the studied texts, but the economic consequences of the situation were repeatedly compared to the financial crisis of 2008–2009 and the bankruptcy of the Lehman investment bank. The changes for society were considered the most severe “since the end of World War II,” which equaled the span of existence of the present Austrian state. The disease itself was on isolated occasion compared to disastrous pandemics of the past, namely “cholera” and the “Black Death,” as well as the “Apocalypse.” Metaphorically, the pandemic was described as a severe “test” or “trial,” but one from which “lessons” could be learned.

#### 4.4 The framing of Ischgl

Based on a literature review, we identified context, scope, responsibility, evaluation, and tone of voice as relevant frames for the Austrian media reporting of the COVID-19 pandemic. For these frames, in this section, we have consolidated the findings from the studied articles on the virus outbreak in Tyrol’s Paznaun Valley.

*Context framing* places an article in a thematic context. Immediately after the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in Austria, the media reporting was clearly dominated by political-legal and social frames. Articles, which placed the pandemic in a *political and / or legal context*, focused on the package of political measures to contain the outbreak and often took the form of announcements (i. e., repeating and summarizing press conferences and official statements about political decisions). War metaphors occurred frequently in this context, but showed little variation and were usually limited to the ubiquitous “fight” against the coronavirus. Readers got the idea that politicians were fighting the sickness physically. Simultaneously, movement and speed metaphors communicated a sense of urgency in terms of virus containment.

In cases of *social context framing*, articles dealt with the social consequences of both COVID-19 and the measures against

it. Among these expressions were hopes for positive effects on climate change, for an awareness of the dangers of globalization, for greater solidarity, and for an understanding of what was truly important in life. Concerns were expressed about the negative effects on freedom and democracy, social life, school-children and their parents, hospitals, and homes for the elderly. All of these feelings were usually stated using ontological metaphors such as “Our Western, urban world is fragile.”

Although the early coverage of COVID-19 most often framed the disease in a political or legal context, *responsibility frames* clearly addressed the readers as those responsible for action and called for solidarity among readers to prevent a more serious outbreak. Especially in commentaries published in *Der Standard*, arguments were frequently made that the suspension of civil rights and democratic freedom was a grave but necessary step, which would only be successful if everyone showed self-discipline and solidarity (Kotynek, 2020; Stuiber, 2020).

*Responsibility framing* also includes blaming those responsible for failure. For obvious reasons, neither nationwide measures against COVID-19 nor the public response came under scrutiny in the first week after the discovery of the virus in Austria, but there was a notable lack of discussion about how Tyrol handled the first outbreak – especially in the local newspaper. The *Tiroler Tageszeitung* argued instead that COVID-19 had created an unprecedented situation in “which we are now smarter than we were yesterday” (Nindler, 2020b). The same newspaper also quoted Tyrolean officials to some extent and allowed them to explain themselves. Not much later, in June 2020, an investigation committee contradicted this moderate stance, and “second Ischgl” became a metaphor for poor crisis management during the pandemic. In sum, the few articles that framed COVID-19 with regard to a responsibility for failure all placed blame on the regional or federal government or individual politicians.

Few articles explored the possible *economic consequences* or related *medical or scientific information*, although findings on both – and especially the latter – may indeed have been influenced by the sampling meth-

od. During this early stage of the pandemic, the influence of the measures on the economic situation of the tourism destination was also not a focus. Only the political reaction to the problem seemed to be held crucial in regard to the epidemic in the ski region.

Since the sample was obtained based on a keyword search using the phrases “Ischgl,” “Tirol,” and “Österreich,” we expected the majority of the coded articles to have a local, regional, or national scope. Tyrol, however, is a federal state sharing borders with both Germany and Italy, and border traffic and the situation in the neighboring countries – particularly in Italy, which was at the time hit hard by the pandemic – were recurring topics. In addition, it appears noteworthy that there was no difference in scope between the local *Tiroler Tageszeitung* and the national, Vienna-based *Die Presse* and *Der Standard*.

The *evaluation framing* of medicinal and political measures was generally favorable, although questions were raised occasionally about whether the government should have declared Tyrol a risk area earlier than it did (Mayer, 2020; Weiser, 2020; Winroither, 2020). Criticism of the restriction of civil rights as an excessive response was rare. Additionally, the lack of investment in school infrastructure found little space in the articles. Mostly, rather, the coded articles rallied behind the government, praising its decisiveness and unity, the crisis management efforts, and concrete decisions. Thus, neutral word choices and factual headlines were common devices. Negative evaluations were reserved for the Tyrolean government’s neglect in taking COVID-19 seriously and acting accordingly and for the fact that Tyrol had not been declared a risk area by the Austrian government.

*Tone-of-voice framing* denotes the overall tone of an article, that is, whether it conveys positive or negative emotions. We based this decision on the connotation of the words used, paying particular attention to depictions and modifiers. We refrained from differentiating the “neutral,” “positive,” and “negative” categories any further to avoid overinterpretation. About half of the articles in our sample used a neutral tone, while the rest transported negative emotions slightly more often than positive emotions.

## 5 Discussion

Numerous studies have examined news frames during emergency situations. This work extends the distinction between rhetorical and technical devices (as suggested by Linström and Marais, 2012) to include reasoning devices. The method suggested in this work permits deeper readings and advises gathering metaphors and comparisons independently, since metaphors in particular are different from rhetorical devices because of their intrinsic constructive quality.

This research approach enabled us to trace the framing of the media reports and to delineate constructions. In the reporting on the spread of the virus in Paznaun Valley in Tyrol, war metaphors were found as shown earlier. As stated in the introduction, metaphors play an important part in framing the pandemic through reasoning devices. In crisis reporting, battle and war metaphors are frequently used (Spencer, 2012). They describe the severity of the situation and argue that drastic measures are required to get the crisis under control (Vondermassen, 2020). However, the image of a battle spreads panic, and measure opponents can be mistaken for supporters of the enemy, which is why war and combat metaphors have been heavily condemned, notably in relation to COVID-19 reporting (Nerlich, 2020; Vondermassen, 2020). In combination with metaphors of movement and speed, the impression that politicians must “strike back” immediately or else the “battle will be lost” was conveyed to the readers. Health or illness metaphors emphasized the seriousness of the problem, with articles imagining the community as affected by the virus and positioning appropriate political decisions as the treatment solution. At the same time, ontological metaphors found in the articles constructed the image of a fragile Western urban world that was at the threat of being dismantled if the community did not band together. Text passages that can be assigned to responsibility framing support this image. The appealing character found in some articles, in which the reader was sometimes addressed directly, indicates that people were held directly responsible for what would happen next.

Considering, however, that tourism is a major economic factor in the ski region, we were surprised that the keywords “Ischgl” and “Tirol” did not yield more articles discussing the impact of the aborted skiing season – or the possible scenarios for summer tourism – on the economy. It was probably even more surprising that the newspapers did not opt for a personal approach in addressing COVID-19 and only on rare occasions quoted or narrated the personal experiences of restaurant owners, tourists, parents of school children, and others. The human implications of the pandemic were thus pushed to the margins. This finding is unexpected in light of previous research on the COVID-19 pandemic: Other studies from different countries have found that in addition to the political responses to the crisis, which were also dominant in this study’s sample, the focus was also on social and economic consequences. One explanation for this could be that the media channels were still busy providing an overview of the unfolding events in the early phase of the crisis. As also noted in Hubner’s (2021) research, the medical and scientific perspective also played a subordinate role in this study’s sample.

When it comes to the question of who is responsible for the outbreak or the wrong decisions made, it can also be assumed that clearer results would only emerge from responsibility framing at a later date. Apart from a few isolated texts, the studied sample downplayed the culpability of the federal or state governments or individuals who transmitted the virus. This is particularly interesting because the handling of Ischgl later became synonymous with flawed political management of the virus.

Contrary to what one might expect at the outbreak of a crisis, a neutral tone of voice was found in the vast majority of the articles considered in this study. This result is in line with other studies that have examined reports on health crises (Lee & Basnyat, 2013, among others). Overall, the tone of voice, on average, suggests a desire to avoid panic through stating facts rather than transporting emotions.

By combining the method of Linström and Marais (2012) with the cognitive metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (2003), one can examine frames used in me-

dia reports, while also attempting to determine which images the coverage constructs in the reader's mind. This paper presents a modified methodology for identifying significant frames during critical phases of a crisis by further developing the existing framing categories. This work can therefore be seen as a contribution to the further development of framing research and the use of metaphors.

## 6 Conclusions and limitations

The discovery of the first outbreak of COVID-19 in Austria triggered a rapid development of events, and within a little over a week, the first nationwide lockdown was declared. Three distinctive features characterized this extraordinary situation in the news sample of this research. First, at this early point in the national news coverage, very few articles reported and commented on the handling of the outbreak in Ischgl. Several factors may explain this noticeable gap in reporting, among them the speed of developments, a strong reliance on official Tyrolean sources, and / or an underestimation of the situation on the part of the media. Therefore, in using responsibility framing, the studied news articles, for the most part, did not attribute blame, but rather addressed the responsibility for taking action instead. Likewise, the tone of voice was either neutral or affirmative of government actions.

Second, political context framing was prevalent in all three newspapers, with a strong focus on reporting and discussing the political actions and countermeasures of the national government. At this early stage, only a small number of frames were identified regarding the possible economic and social consequences, in contrast to the findings of other studies (e.g., Basch et al., 2020; Hart et al., 2020; Hubner, 2021; Tejedor et al., 2020). Even fewer text passages framed the situation in personal contexts, evidenced by the use of sources and quotes relying heavily on official voices and rarely conveying personal experiences.

Third, after the lockdown was announced, many commentaries were structured around calls for solidarity. The nationwide lockdown within ten days of the outbreak

meant drastic changes to public life, and the metaphors and comparisons mirrored the sentiment that something extraordinary was happening, which needed an extraordinary response from society, but the tone of voice overall remained neutral in such reporting as well. Like other researchers (e.g., Isaacs & Priesz, 2021), we found that metaphors of war and natural disaster were used frequently to conceptualize the coronavirus, but without much variation. However, metaphors of spatial orientation, movement, and physical objects for society were just as frequent and tended to be more varied. A study of both the reasons for and the effects of these findings, however, is beyond the scope of this research.

In sum, the news framing was clearly aimed at passing on information to the general public and conveying a sense of the severity of the situation, while at the same time trying to avoid spreading fear.

Through this study, we were able to identify framing features and metaphors used by Austrian news outlets at a very early stage of the pandemic. After the events caused the virus to spread to neighboring countries as well, it might be interesting for future research to compare the identified frames with those in non-Austrian media. Additionally, it would be intriguing to extend the investigation period to determine when the framing regarding responsibility changed in Austrian newspaper. The short time span may also account for the limited number of metaphorical concepts determined. Further research could bridge this gap and examine how metaphors evolved as the pandemic progressed. Some journalists adopted the apocalypse metaphor, for example, and spoke of the “corona hell of Europe” in the case of particularly affected regions. Future research should investigate which metaphorical concepts have gained significance during the pandemic and at what point Ischgl became a “corona hell” from a previously “serious but manageable situation” – if people stick together.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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